

USS AZ_OHC_#352_Robert Williams_06-14-94

Transcription Date: 09/20/09 – Transcriber: STA

[BEGIN AUDIO]

INTERVIEWER: The following oral history interview was conducted on June 14th, 1994 at 12:00 in the afternoon by the National Park Service American Memorial in cooperation with Marianna's Cable Vision. The subject is Mr. Robert Williams, veteran of the Marianna's campaign. The interviewer is Daniel Martinez, historian for the USS Arizona Memorial. For the record Mr. Williams would you state your full name and middle name as well?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Robert Leonard Williams.

INTERVIEWER: And could you spell that last name for the record?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And where were you born?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I was born in Springfield, Colorado.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the date on that?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: 8/8/21. August the 8th, 1921.

INTERVIEWER: Okay and what were you're parent's names?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: My dad was Clyde L. Williams and my mother was Ada L. Williams.

INTERVIEWER: Okay and how many brothers and sisters did you have?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well I've got in the first family I've got a brother and a sister. The second family there's four young My dad remarried and they had four more kids.

INTERVIEWER: How many of them are still living?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Five. We have five.

INTERVIEWER: And your father is still alive?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: No he's deceased. He died at 91. My mother died at 96.

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INTERVIEWER: Wow. What town did you grow up in?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well on a farm near Springfield, Colorado. And then later then we went to California. But my dad stayed in Missouri, in the Stone County, Missouri. So when I say grew up Colorado, Missouri, California.

INTERVIEWER: Pretty scattered experience huh?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How did you come about joining the navy?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: My draft number came up and so I didn't wanted to be drafted so I joined the navy.

INTERVIEWER: So you wanted to choose your fate right?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: That's about right.

INTERVIEWER: And where did you go to training at?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I was in what we call navy V7 program where if you had at least two years at college they let you finish college. And so I was in V7 and then when I graduated from Georgetown University in Washington DC I then was sent to Notre Dame Naval Reserve [INDISCERNIBLE] School.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard of it but I've never met anybody that went to that Notre Dame [INDISCERNIBLE] School.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well there's quite a few around.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I got my commission on January the 20th, 1944 and I was [INDISCERNIBLE] in June then.

INTERVIEWER: So your first combat was here?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: That's correct. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Well let's talk about The navy had selected you to do what based on their training?

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ROBERT WILLIAMS: When I was in Naval Reserve [INDISCERNIBLE] School they gave you a choice. They said you choose what you want to do. So most everybody chose I think down aircraft carriers and battleships and the whole class went to [PH] Aunt Fibs. My first orders were to fifth [PH] amphibious core and of course then I went to Hawaii for a couple months and [PH] wy manila amphibious training base. Then to the [PH] Lenon Wald LST 6 and that's how I got to [INDISCERNIBLE]. We picked up second marine tanks down in Hilo, Hawaii and off we went to [PH] Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: So you weren't present during the LST explosion at Westlock?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: As a matter of fact I was The Lenon Wald We were there. We were there but I wasn't part of it. I knew about it at the time.

INTERVIEWER: It was part of this operation and

ROBERT WILLIAMS: What happened the LST explosion was just before we picked up the second marine tanks down at Hilo.

INTERVIEWER: Wow. Well it was something to be missed. Believe me. You're on your way out here to the Pacific what kind of impressions did you have of coming out here to this body of water and these islands?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well I'd always Everybody's heard of Hawaii and of course we had no idea what I was getting into. We went amphibious training and we spent day after day for a couple of months at Wai Manela which is on the north side of Awahu and we worked with LCMs and LCVPs and rough... . In fact they sent us out in the roughest weather they could because they thought we might have rough weather.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Well I know the Wai Manalo area and I've seen pictures of that training and there was no doubt what you were training for was there?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: No I don't think there was any doubt what we were going to expect to train for certainly.

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INTERVIEWER: Tell me about your first impression of Saipan as you [INDISCERNIBLE] off shore.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: We [INDISCERNIBLE]. The [INDISCERNIBLE] and then we came Saipan. We got here the night before June 15th and I got up at 3:00. They got everybody up at 3:00 in the morning and we went out on deck and it was like 4th of July. You had the battleships firing at Saipan and you had It was just lights and it was actually like the 4th of July fireworks display.

INTERVIEWER: As one veteran told me it was fascinatingly pretty.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well that's probably right. That's probably right. And then of course on LSD we had 21 LCMs each with a 45-tonne Sherman tank aboard. And so we put water in the well deck and then of course we fired up the LCMs and you drove those LCMs with the Sherman tanks out, out of the well deck, and we formed in waves and we were ready to go ashore.

INTERVIEWER: It was a pretty amazing page of American naval history – this whole amphibious operations. These vessels were unique in their design and application and by 1944 we were pretty much well on our way to being able to land troops and equipment and you were part of that. Were you fascinated by the technology that was being developed?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: You know when we were in the time that we were Wy Manela they were also testing out some night vision stuff. They've had us out at night and we had special goggles we had and we were supposed to use those and they were trying to see if those would improve night vision.

INTERVIEWER: And did they?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I don't think so. I don't think. At least they didn't improve it for me.

INTERVIEWER: Not like today's optics right?

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ROBERT WILLIAMS: No, no not like today's optics. But that was part of the things that were going in the amphib navy.

INTERVIEWER: Now did you ... ? What was your job with the LCMs and all that?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I was a board officer and so I went Lenon Wald as a boat officer. I was trained as a boat officer and specifically to take LCMs, well as it worked out, take LCMs into Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: So since you're a captain of one of those [INDISCERNIBLE].

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I'm a wave leader. We had I was the third wave on Green Beach 3 and I had seven LCMs each with a Sherman tank in that wave.

INTERVIEWER: For those that don't understand the military jargon, a wave leader does ... ?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: You're in charge of those seven LCMs each with a 45-tonne Sherman tank. You're responsibility to get those to shore.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And that's what you were in charge of here?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: That's correct.

INTERVIEWER: And how did you do discharging your duties that day?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: We got all of our tanks to shore that day. We did very well. There were five LCDs at Saipan and I think I'd heard later the Lenon Wald was the only one that we got all of our tanks ashore.

INTERVIEWER: And where did you put them ashore?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Green Beach 3 down by [PH} Sharenkanaoa.

INTERVIEWER: And did it pretty much go as practiced?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Yeah it did because we were due to go in right at I don't know I forgot 8:30 or something like that and we went in and let our tanks off. And at least Some of the others had more problems than we had and we got all of our tanks to shore so

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INTERVIEWER: Now did the Japanese give you a welcoming reception?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well the Japanese On the first wave I talked to the wave leader of the first wave and they didn't have much fire. And the second had maybe some. But when we got to the third wave

INTERVIEWER: Which was you.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: That was me, why we had quite a lot of fire.

INTERVIEWER: Now did any of your vessels get struck?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: We maybe had some We got struck but none of them were struck to the point that we would have lost any tanks. If an LCM with a 45-tonne tank got hit out in deep water it just keeled over and hey the tank went to the bottom. But we had [INDISCERNIBLE].

INTERVIEWER: Just to [INDISCERNIBLE] are the crew members in that tank at all times?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: The marines were theoretically in that tank at all times but as a practical matter those marines on those 45-tonne tanks weren't in them until we got to the beach because they didn't want to go to the bottom incase

INTERVIEWER: You guys got hit.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Yeah incase we got hit.

INTERVIEWER: So the practical application was they're supposed to be. The reality was they weren't until you hit the beach.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: That's right. That's right.

INTERVIEWER: And the tanks fired up alright and went ashore.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Yeah. In fact the second marines had more tanks I think operating than say the fourth marines and they Anyway the [INDISCERNIBLE] that they got more tanks ashore than I think the fourth marine division did.

INTERVIEWER: They had a little bit of fighting ahead of them with those tanks.

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ROBERT WILLIAMS: Oh yeah those tanks made a big difference because they were I stayed on Saipan and I had contact with the marines that we took into Saipan and hey those guys were The tanks were a big part of the operation on Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: A lot of gunfire, a lot of near misses on your landing craft because there's even on those craft because you can see some of the photos and such. When you got ashore what was it like here on Saipan?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well I stayed in the boat pool. I was already designated to stay in the boat pool on Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: So you're going back and forth then?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: And so immediately when we let off our tanks on Saipan hey I was then became boat pool on Saipan and we immediately started hauling supplies and equipment from the ships out in the harbor out again into the beach.

INTERVIEWER: Did you bring back wounded?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: We ordinarily would take I think the first night on after D-Day we were taking supplies in already and then we would take wounded out and they would put wounded on the LCMs and we'd haul them out to the hospital ships. And when we got to the hospital ship if a guy was dead they wouldn't take him. They would check them and if he was dead why hey they said take him back to the beach and that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER: What was the waters like that day and the weather?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: The weather on D-Day morning was rough. In fact it wasn't as rough as some of the stuff we saw on the north side of Oahu. The north side of Oahu has huge waves. In fact that's a surfer's beach these days. I was back at Wy Manela later and you can't even see where we were. It's all torn down.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah it's different.

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ROBERT WILLIAMS: But the water on the morning of D-Day on Saipan was more swells than usually or than later that summer because I was here until October.

INTERVIEWER: What was the sky and weather like? Was it sky blue? Spotted clouds?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: It was cloudy. It was cloudy.

INTERVIEWER: It was overcast a bit huh?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: It was overcast yeah. I had a camera along that morning. And I was going to take pictures and so when I got into the beach I didn't take any pictures until later in the day. I took the pictures later on the beach. But that time I didn't. And I also took pictures later. Try to take some of the, any, aircraft fire but that didn't show up in pictures either.

INTERVIEWER: Now this was your first combat experience so what was that like?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Hey I think when you're 22 years old you have the attitude nothing's going to happen to you so I don't think that I even thought about that because you think hey this is a great adventure and [INDISCERNIBLE] when I was in the navy in V7 hey we were afraid the war was going to be over before we got a chance to be in it.

INTERVIEWER: And did some of the reality of all this start taking hold when you started hauling back wounded and dead?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: The reality took place when two of the kids that rode into Saipan on D-Day got killed.

INTERVIEWER: And when you say kids how old were they?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well most of the boat pool in Saipan was 17, 18, 19 years old. I was 22 and I was you know

INTERVIEWER: The old man.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: The old man. One of the old men of the deal.

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INTERVIEWER: And how did you lose these individuals?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: They got killed. I wasn't there. This was a day or two after D-Day they got killed by a small arms fire.

INTERVIEWER: And they were in a kind of an exposed position on the boat right?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Yeah. I wasn't there at the time. This wasn't on D-Day. It was a few days later they got killed.

INTERVIEWER: The kind of death and destruction that took place along these beaches in Saipan was You look at the photos and it's The only word I can think is awestruck at the amount of equipment coming ashore and people and the jungle and all the elements against

ROBERT WILLIAMS: They practically knocked down all the vegetation and the trees and so forth. I used to accuse the marines of doing it but the navy big guns did a tremendous job of [INDISCERNIBLE].

INTERVIEWER: So a lot of the vegetation that we see along the shoreline today was just nonexistent [INDISCERNIBLE].

ROBERT WILLIAMS: The boat pool, we had a camp and we started out down by [INDISCERNIBLE] we had a camp and we were you know we ate there and we fought the flies, the flies and mosquitoes. We would shew flies with one hand and eat with the other to start with. And then we finally had like screens on the windows that we could at least eat without having flies all over the place or without mosquitoes and then a little later they started Saipan. I don't know what they sprayed it with. Probably DDT but we got rid of most of the flies and most of the mosquitoes.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah I was surprised when I came here to visit there wasn't as much as I expected to be here. Because I had read about that.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: We had most mosquitoes in Hawaii when I was at Wy Manela than we had after a month or so on Saipan. The mosquitoes They had a couple of

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planes over there. A two engine plane came down and this would spray up and down Saipan and they got rid of Whatever they were using they got rid of the

INTERVIEWER: And you probably don't want to know.

ROBERT WILLIAMS: I maybe don't want to know.

INTERVIEWER: When did you finally come ashore and what were your duties?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Well I came ashore on D-Day and I was immediately part of the boat pool. A number of ships that were at Saipan were told to leave so many officers and so many men. And the Lenon Wald that I was on was told to leave two officers and, I forgot, 30 men. And we drew straws. The officers, we drew straws and I and another officer by the name of Joseph Patrick Kelly the third got the short straws and we were the two officers from the Lenon Wald that stayed here. The Lenon Wald went back to the states for overhaul and we got to stay on Saipan. And then the Lenon Wald I think we had 30 men from all these kids that we had in the boat pool or the boat officer, the boat people on Lenon Wald were part of the boat pool on Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: I see. And you operated that boat pool for how long?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well I was here until October and but by October why there wasn't the rush to get stuff ashore that it was right after D-Day because the marines wanted things. And of course we made the invasion of [PH] tinian from Saipan too.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. You were involved in that as well?

ROBERT WILIAMS: I was a wave leader in [PH] Wy too and [PH] tinian.

INTERVIEWER: A little different action than Saipan?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Hey that was invaded from Saipan and we got up at three o'clock in the morning. Everything gets up at three in the morning for an invasion I think. And we loaded the boats and I had a [INDISCERNIBLE] bunch of boats and I had 15 boats in this wave that I had. I was supposed to be like the tenth wave over in tinian. So we got over there and of course we were And I was not supposed to

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take anything in. The tenth wave I said hell we'll get in about noon. And we got over there and here came emergency call for rocket launchers. I had five rocket launchers in the 15 boats and so we ran the rocket launchers in on Wy 2. And then we waited all day on tinian to take the rest of the boats in. Never got in and so went back to Saipan that night and pulled into our camp and we had marines on board and on these other 10. I still had 10 boats. And I slept out on the boat because I had these guys that I was responsible for and during the night I woke up and this guy was saying help, help I'm drowning. And of course we were inside the lagoon and here was a guy that had fallen off, a marine had fallen off, into the water. So I said well stand up. He stood up and he was in about you know four feet of water. But anyway the next morning we went back to tinian and we landed the rest of our wave.

INTERVIEWER: You know I've asked a lot of veterans that we've interviewed why did they want to come back to Saipan and I suspect I will ask you the same thing. What drew you back here for this anniversary?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well you know I was at Guam. I was at Guam in 1945. Sitting in Guam on the staff of LST group 100 and so I was familiar with Saipan and Guam and I had been at a different [INAUDIBLE]. I had been in [PH] Awitak and places like that. But Saipan is a more unusual island – the most unusual of any island out here I think.

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

ROBERT WILIAMS: It's got the Mount [PH] Tapichal on it. It's got It's the only island out here that it's got canyons and valleys and things like that. And so you know I was on Guam in 1945 when I went And then was sent to China to train Chinese navy and one place that I remember most was Saipan. And so when I got a chance to come back to Saipan why I said, hey let's do it.

INTERVIEWER: Have you run into any old friends at all yet or marines that you knew?

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ROBERT WILIAMS: You know I expected to see some people that I knew on Saipan when I got here. But I have not run into one person that I knew on Saipan.

INTERVIEWER: What marine division did you support?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Second marines.

INTERVIEWER: There's a lot of second marines. Maybe that will happen.

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well but I have found nobody from ANC company tanks. We took ANC company tanks which is a not too many people involved as compared to a battalion or a company or something like that. And so in fact I don't think there's anybody here from ANC company tanks of second marines, second marine division.

INTERVIEWER: Is that a bit of a disappointment for you?

ROBERT WILIAMS: It is but hey the people I've met on this trip have been great. The marine officers and the Mostly it's marines that I've met. And this tour group is mostly all marines.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Yeah there's a lot of them here. And of course the local hospitality people have been wonderful haven't they?

ROBERT WILLIAMS: Hey we've hardly had time to turn on the TV you know. It has been great. It has been very good.

INTERVIEWER: Well it's the US navy story of course has been as my view as a historian really underrated in the pages because of the tremendous amount of burden that was placed on the navy for the amphibious landings and of course of the support that happened. And it's good that we talked to you because we probably wouldn't have had a chance to hear the navy side of this story. Is there something that you want to mention that we might not have covered in this few minutes we've been together?

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ROBERT WILIAMS: Well I don't know. Not about Saipan. I was involved in other stuff in the navy. But I enjoyed the navy. Hell I wouldn't have stayed in or wouldn't have stayed in reserve and got called back during Korea if I hadn't stayed in the reserve.

INTERVIEWER: And you went through the whole Korean war as well?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And then after were you still active in the navy?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well I had I was back in for two years plus three in Korea. But I stayed in reserve and I finally retired. I've got 20 and a half years of I've 26 and a half years of navy time of which 20 and a half is reserve time and the rest is active duty time.

INTERVIEWER: So you've been in the navy as much as almost as practicing equation and that?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well in the reserve you have to go to drills once a week. And then you spend two weeks training duty every year. And one year you're at a school and the next year you're aboard a ship. And I've been to You know in 20 years well you get to see all the navy schools. You get to see The last ship I was on was a midway at an aircraft carrier. The people who do that have enjoyed what they're doing. They wouldn't stay in it.

INTERVIEWER: And of course the navy has changed a great deal since World War II.

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well that's true too. In fact I was in San Diego three days over Memorial Day and I had to go by and see a ship while I was there.

INTERVIEWER: Well the experience at Saipan has been, as I interviewed these folks and you included, it seems to be a unique experience in something that has etched itself of their memory.

ROBERT WILIAMS: I think that's true. Well I'll say that one thing I remember about Saipan I was here during this boat pool and the things that I remember like the

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Japs tried to, the Japanese tried to, bring over a couple of large loads of troops from tinian and the navy blew those barges out of the water and there was about 600, they told us, about 600 Japanese floating in the water out there in channel and we had to steer clear of those otherwise you fouled up your screws on the LCMs. And the other thing that I still remember is when they had that big bonsai charge up by past [INDISCERNIBLE]. Why we were living right there in [INDISCERNIBLE] so we go up the next day to see all the dead Japanese.

INTERVIEWER: What was that like?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Hey you never I couldn't imagine you could have as many bodies. In fact at the time they told us or I heard there was 15,000. But I heard later it was like 3,000. But they were just stocked up like cord wood and it reminded me - I'm somewhat of a civil war buff - it reminded me of the pictures you saw of Cold Harbor were you had bodies stocked up like four deep. And so they had this big bulldozer up there who was scraping out a trench and they would push them in and But you know that when you have that many dead bodies it doesn't relate to you until someone that you know who gets killed.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever loose anybody in the war that you knew fairly close other than the kids?

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well my stepmother had three brother killed in Europe in a four-moth period. They were in the army and of course I knew them. They were all In fact one of them was younger than I was see. Anyway she had These you know they're three people in four months went. All three of them got killed in the army. They were in the army in Europe.

INTERVIEWER: Where they killed in the Normandy Campaign?

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ROBERT WILIAMS: One of them was the Battle of the Bulge. And one was killed in [INDISCERNIBLE] in Italy and I forget where the other one was killed. All three within a four-month period.

INTERVIEWER: Well the World War II experience is something that young Americans like myself, the post-war kids, are reliving through you and the veterans like that. And I think that came home vividly with the coverage on Normandy. And unfortunately I think that a lot of the Pacific war campaigns are not being covered as closely.

ROBERT WILIAMS: Oh I think that's true but look at Normandy. What'd you have? A hundred divisions that went ashore. What did we have three divisions that went ashore?

INTERVIEWER: That's right. A little bit different.

ROBERT WILIAMS: It's a little bit different.

INTERVIEWER: Different scale.

ROBERT WILIAMS: But you're just as dead whether you get killed

INTERVIEWER: In Normandy or Saipan.

ROBERT WILIAMS: Or Saipan yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Well I want to thank you for this interview and it did bring some insight into a subject that we certainly wanted to cover so thank you very much.

ROBERT WILIAMS: Well I was a A little different side of this, from the marine core side, you get that from

[END AUDIO]